

# Reconceptualising Child Trafficking, Migration, And Agency In West Africa: Kinship, Care, Criminalisation, And The Politics Of Protection

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**Abstract:** Child trafficking in West Africa has increasingly been framed as a singular criminal phenomenon, detached from the complex socio-cultural, economic, and historical realities that shape children's mobility, labour participation, and kinship-based care arrangements. Drawing exclusively on interdisciplinary scholarship and policy-oriented literature, this article offers an extensive theoretical and analytical interrogation of dominant trafficking discourses, with particular emphasis on Ghana, Nigeria, and the wider West African sub-region. It argues that prevailing global and national anti-trafficking frameworks often obscure children's agency, misrecognise culturally embedded practices such as fostering and labour migration, and produce unintended harms through criminalisation and rescue-oriented interventions. By synthesising perspectives from childhood studies, feminist political economy, human rights law, migration studies, and critical criminology, the article demonstrates how binaries such as victim versus agent, trafficking versus migration, and protection versus exploitation are analytically insufficient. The methodology is grounded in qualitative meta-synthesis of peer-reviewed research, international reports, and legal analyses, allowing for a nuanced reconstruction of empirical patterns and conceptual debates without reliance on primary field data. The findings reveal persistent tensions between international legal instruments, national enforcement regimes, and everyday survival strategies of families and children under conditions of structural poverty and inequality. The discussion highlights how anti-trafficking campaigns, celebrity advocacy, and visual propaganda contribute to moral panics, while often marginalising children's own voices and lived experiences. The article concludes by proposing a reconceptualisation of child trafficking that foregrounds interdependence, social reproduction, and contextual agency, and calls for policy approaches that move beyond punitive logics towards rights-based, child-centred, and structurally informed responses.

**Keywords:** Child trafficking; child migration; agency; kinship care; West Africa; human rights; social reproduction.

**Introduction:** The contemporary global concern with child trafficking has produced a dense assemblage of legal instruments, policy frameworks, humanitarian interventions, and advocacy campaigns that seek to identify, rescue, rehabilitate, and reintegrate children defined as victims of exploitation. Nowhere is this assemblage more visible than in West Africa, a region repeatedly represented in international reports as a hotspot of child trafficking, child labour, and modern slavery (UNODC, 2021; UNODC, 2024; ILO, 2024). Ghana and Nigeria, in particular, have become emblematic sites through which global anxieties about mobility, childhood, and exploitation are articulated

and governed. Yet, as an expanding body of critical scholarship demonstrates, these representations often flatten complex realities and reproduce conceptual binaries that obscure more than they illuminate (O'Connell Davidson, 2010; Dottridge, 2007; Desyllas, 2007).

At the heart of this debate lies a fundamental tension between protectionist paradigms rooted in international law and the lived social worlds of children and families for whom migration, fostering, and work are integral to survival and social reproduction. Historical and anthropological research has long documented the centrality of child fostering and

circulation within kinship networks across West Africa, highlighting its role in education, skill acquisition, labour sharing, and social belonging (Goody, 1982; Isiugo-Abanihe, 1985; Walmsley, 2008). However, contemporary anti-trafficking frameworks frequently recast these practices as inherently suspect or exploitative, particularly when they intersect with poverty, urbanisation, and informal labour markets (Mbakogu, 2021; Derby, 2012).

The expansion of anti-trafficking legislation and enforcement mechanisms since the adoption of the Palermo Protocol has further intensified these dynamics. While the Protocol sought to establish a unified international definition of trafficking, critics argue that it collapses diverse forms of mobility and labour into a single criminal category, thereby erasing important distinctions between coercion, consent, necessity, and aspiration (Doezema, 1998; Einarsdóttir & Boiro, 2014). For children, whose legal capacity is already constrained by age-based assumptions of vulnerability, this collapse is particularly consequential. Children on the move are routinely denied recognition as social actors, and their decisions are reinterpreted through a lens of deception, force, or manipulation, even in contexts where mobility is negotiated within families and communities (Huijsmans, 2011; Abebe, 2019).

This article addresses these conceptual and empirical challenges by offering an extensive theoretical analysis of child trafficking and child migration in West Africa, grounded strictly in the provided literature. Rather than treating trafficking as a self-evident category, the article interrogates how it is produced through discourse, law, and practice, and how these productions intersect with gender, age, poverty, and power. It asks three interrelated questions. First, how have dominant trafficking discourses framed children, families, and mobility in West Africa? Second, what alternative understandings of agency, interdependence, and care emerge from empirical studies of child migration and fostering? Third, what are the implications of these tensions for policy, practice, and future research?

By addressing these questions, the article contributes to ongoing debates about the limits of criminal justice responses to trafficking, the ethics of rescue, and the need for child-centred, contextually grounded interventions. It situates itself within critical trafficking studies and childhood studies, challenging universalist assumptions about childhood while remaining attentive to the very real harms that children experience under conditions of exploitation and abuse (Pearce, 2011; Mbakogu & Odiyi, 2021). In doing so, it seeks not to deny the existence of trafficking, but to

complicate how it is understood, governed, and addressed.

## Methodology

The methodological approach adopted in this study is qualitative and interpretive, relying on an extensive meta-synthesis of existing scholarly literature, policy documents, and institutional reports drawn exclusively from the provided reference list. This approach is particularly appropriate for a research objective that is theoretical and conceptual rather than empirical in the narrow sense. Rather than generating new primary data, the study systematically analyses how knowledge about child trafficking, migration, and agency has been produced, contested, and mobilised across disciplines and institutional contexts.

The meta-synthesis involved several interconnected stages. First, the references were categorised thematically into core clusters, including childhood and agency, kinship and fostering, child migration and labour, trafficking discourse and law, anti-trafficking policy and practice, and humanitarian and media representations. This thematic organisation enabled a structured yet flexible engagement with a large and diverse body of work spanning anthropology, sociology, criminology, social work, feminist studies, and international law.

Second, each cluster was subjected to close textual analysis, with particular attention to conceptual definitions, theoretical frameworks, and underlying normative assumptions. For example, literature on children's agency was analysed to identify how agency is variously conceptualised as autonomy, resistance, negotiation, or interdependence (Abebe, 2019; Huijsmans, 2011). Similarly, legal and policy-oriented texts were examined to uncover how vulnerability, consent, and exploitation are operationalised within criminal justice frameworks (Rijken, 2009; Demeke, 2024).

Third, the analysis explicitly sought points of tension and contradiction across clusters. Rather than harmonising divergent perspectives, the methodology foregrounds disagreement as analytically productive. For instance, ethnographic accounts of child labour migration that emphasise social networks and aspiration were placed in dialogue with policy documents that frame similar movements as trafficking (Heissler, 2013; UNODC, 2021). This dialogic approach allows for a critical examination of how power operates in defining legitimate and illegitimate forms of childhood mobility.

Throughout the process, methodological reflexivity was maintained regarding the limitations of secondary analysis. The article does not claim to represent the

voices of children directly; instead, it critically examines how those voices have been mediated, amplified, or silenced in existing research and advocacy (Dottridge, 2008; Okyere et al., 2021). Ethical considerations are therefore addressed at the level of representation, recognising that knowledge production itself can reproduce harm when it simplifies or instrumentalises children's experiences.

By adopting this methodology, the study aligns with critical traditions that view trafficking not merely as an empirical problem to be measured, but as a social and political construct shaped by historical legacies, global inequalities, and institutional interests (Sharapov & Mendel, 2018; O'Connell Davidson, 2016).

## Results

The analytical synthesis of the literature reveals several interrelated findings that challenge dominant understandings of child trafficking in West Africa. These findings do not emerge as statistical outcomes, but as recurring patterns of argument, evidence, and critique across diverse studies.

One central finding concerns the historical normalisation of child mobility within kinship systems. Anthropological and demographic research consistently shows that child fostering has long been a socially sanctioned and morally valued practice across West African societies (Goody, 1982; Isiugo-Abanihe, 1985). Children are sent to live with relatives not only in response to crisis, but as part of deliberate strategies for socialisation, education, and labour redistribution. In Ghana, fostering has been closely linked to apprenticeship systems and rural–urban connections, enabling children to acquire skills and contribute to household economies (Boakye-Boaten, 2010; Derby, 2012).

A second key finding is the growing disjuncture between these practices and contemporary anti-trafficking frameworks. Multiple studies document how laws and policies increasingly conflate fostering and labour migration with trafficking, particularly when children engage in paid or unpaid work outside their natal homes (Sertich & Heemskerk, 2011; Mbakogu, 2021). This conflation is reinforced by international reporting mechanisms that prioritise quantification and categorisation over contextual analysis, leading to inflated estimates and moralised narratives (Farrell & Fahy, 2009; Wilson & O'Brien, 2016).

Third, the literature highlights the ambivalent position of children's agency within trafficking discourse. While childhood studies emphasise children as social actors capable of negotiation and decision-making, anti-trafficking frameworks largely deny such agency, constructing children as passive victims in need of

rescue (Abebe, 2019; Uy, 2011). Empirical studies of child migrants and trafficked children complicate this picture, showing that many children actively seek work opportunities, rely on peer and kin networks, and make strategic choices within constrained circumstances (Heissler, 2013; Dougnon, 2011). However, recognising agency does not negate vulnerability; rather, it reveals how agency and exploitation coexist.

Another significant finding relates to the unintended consequences of anti-trafficking interventions. Several authors document how raids, rescues, and removals can disrupt social networks, criminalise families, and expose children to further harm, including retrafficking (Dottridge, 2007; Golo & Eshun, 2019). In Ghana's fishing communities, for example, children removed from work on Lake Volta have sometimes returned to exploitative conditions due to lack of sustainable alternatives, highlighting the limits of rescue-based approaches (Derby, 2012).

Finally, the analysis underscores the role of media, celebrity advocacy, and visual campaigns in shaping public perceptions of trafficking. These representations often rely on emotive imagery and simplified narratives that foreground innocence, suffering, and rescue, while marginalising structural causes such as poverty, inequality, and lack of social protection (Haynes, 2014; Okyere et al., 2021). Such framing not only influences policy priorities but also shapes funding, research agendas, and intervention models.

## Discussion

The findings outlined above invite a deeper theoretical discussion about how child trafficking is conceptualised and governed. At the core of this discussion is the tension between universalist models of childhood embedded in international law and culturally specific practices of care, labour, and mobility. The dominant model underpinning anti-trafficking frameworks is one in which childhood is defined by dependency, schooling, and protection from work. Deviations from this model are interpreted as indicators of exploitation, regardless of context (Boakye-Boaten, 2010; O'Connell Davidson, 2010).

Childhood studies scholars challenge this model by arguing for a relational and context-sensitive understanding of childhood. Abebe's reconceptualisation of agency as a continuum emphasises that children's actions are shaped by interdependence rather than isolated autonomy (Abebe, 2019). This perspective is particularly relevant in contexts where survival depends on collective strategies and where children's contributions are morally and economically valued. Recognising interdependent agency does not romanticise child

labour or ignore abuse; instead, it demands a more nuanced assessment of harm that accounts for children's perspectives and social relations.

From a feminist and political economy standpoint, the criminalisation of child migration can be seen as part of broader governance strategies that manage poverty through control rather than redistribution (Desyllas, 2007; Lobasz, 2009). Anti-trafficking laws often target intermediaries and families without addressing the structural conditions that make migration necessary, such as rural underdevelopment, unemployment, and inadequate education systems (Adesina, 2014; ILO, 2024). As a result, enforcement may exacerbate vulnerability by removing coping mechanisms without providing viable alternatives.

The human rights-based approach advocated by scholars such as Rijken and Demeke offers an important corrective by emphasising dignity, participation, and accountability (Rijken, 2009; Demeke, 2024). However, even rights-based frameworks can reproduce paternalism if children's voices are filtered through adult interpretations of best interests. Empirical work with trafficked and migrant children reveals that their priorities often include income generation, skill acquisition, and family support, goals that are rarely central to rehabilitation programmes (Mbakogu, 2015; Abdullah et al., 2020).

The discussion must also address the politics of knowledge production. Sharapov and Mendel's concept of "docufictions" highlights how anti-trafficking truths are manufactured through selective storytelling that privileges certain experiences while silencing others (Sharapov & Mendel, 2018). Similarly, the construction of the "ideal victim" in official reports reinforces hierarchies of deservingness, marginalising those who do not conform to expectations of innocence or passivity (Wilson & O'Brien, 2016).

Limitations of this study include its reliance on secondary sources and its focus on West Africa, which may not capture variations across other regions. Nevertheless, the breadth and depth of the literature analysed provide a robust foundation for theoretical reflection. Future research should prioritise participatory methods that centre children's voices and examine long-term outcomes of anti-trafficking interventions beyond immediate rescue.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that dominant approaches to child trafficking in West Africa are analytically and ethically limited by their reliance on rigid binaries, criminal justice logics, and universalist notions of childhood. By synthesising a wide range of interdisciplinary scholarship, it has shown that child

mobility, labour, and fostering cannot be understood outside their social, historical, and economic contexts. Practices that are increasingly labelled as trafficking are often embedded in strategies of care, survival, and aspiration, even as they expose children to real risks and harm.

A reconceptualisation of child trafficking is therefore necessary—one that recognises children's interdependent agency, addresses structural inequalities, and prioritises social protection over punishment. Such a shift requires moving beyond rescue-centric models towards interventions that support families, expand educational and livelihood opportunities, and engage children as participants rather than objects of policy. Only by embracing this complexity can responses to child trafficking avoid doing harm in the name of protection and contribute meaningfully to children's wellbeing and rights.

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